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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the results of a Phi Delta Kappa study (1996) of core values in the schools, focusing on student and teacher perceptions of alcohol and drug use and sexual behavior among high school students. The study involved 2,125 teachers and 2,429 students. About three-fourths of the students were white, Catholic, middle-class, and attended parochial schools. It found that 79 percent of teachers thought that students would answer affirmatively that they sometimes used alcohol when encouraged to do so by friends, that 51 percent of teachers thought that students would answer affirmatively regarding drug use, and that 69 percent thought that students would answer affirmatively in regard to engaging in sexual activity. Student responses indicated that 32 percent of parochial students and 22 percent of public school students reported using alcohol, 15 percent of parochial school and 18 percent of public school students reported using drugs, and that 38 percent of parochial and 59 percent of public school students reported engaging in sexual activity. The paper discusses the results in light of public, media, and teacher perceptions of alcohol and drug use and sexual behavior among teenagers, along with the morality of such behaviors. (MDM)

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Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex: Are Kids As Bad As We Think They Are?

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A Sunday newspaper's magazine section headlined the story: "Why More Kids Are Into Pot." [1] The media often claim that there are serious problems among youth today, and most adults get their information about the young from the general media. But are young people as bad as we are told? Like Will Rogers used to say, "All I know is what I read in the newspapers," although we might add today, "and what I see on TV."

Some people (e.g., parents and teachers) have daily contact with youth, and theoretically, at least, have more direct experience (thus presumably better information) than those who know about young people primarily from what they read in the newspapers and see on television.

In *A Study of Core Values and the Schools*, Phi Delta Kappa reported a study of 2,125 high school teachers' estimates of how their high school students would respond to a values questionnaire. [2] The teachers came from more than 50 secondary schools in 36 communities throughout the country. They were not randomly selected, but they were typical teachers in typical schools.

There were 43 statements on the questionnaire, and teachers were asked: "How would teenagers in your school respond to the following statements about values?" At another point in the directions, teachers were asked to respond "according to how you think most teenagers in your school would respond." The teachers' responses to three of the 43 value statements will be reported here. Those three statements, which actually described behaviors, were as follows:

27. I use alcohol sometimes, when my friends encourage me to do so.
28. I use drugs sometimes, when my friends encourage me to do so.
29. I have engaged in sexual activity with friends of the opposite sex.

We began this project with an explicit assumption: If high school students drink alcohol, use drugs, or engage in sexual activity, they are engaging in immoral and illegal behavior. They are "bad" kids, in the conventional use of that term. Some might argue that drinking alcohol, using drugs, and engaging in sexual activity are not really "bad" behaviors, since other people are not generally involved (assuming mutual consent in the sexual activity), whereas lying, robbery, assault, or homicide are really "bad" because other people get hurt or are otherwise affected in negative ways.

That argument may have merit, but we held to the conventional conception of morality: young people who drink alcohol, use drugs, or engage in sexual activity are behaving in illegal, immoral ways. They are "bad" kids, as that term is usually employed. They may have a lot of

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redeeming qualities, but in those three areas they are definitely "bad" (as adults use the term, not as teenagers sometimes use the word "bad" to imply that something is really "good").

In all, 79% of the teachers estimated that students would respond "Yes" to the question about alcohol, 51% thought that students would respond "Yes" to the question about drugs, and 69% thought that students would respond "Yes" to the statement about engaging in sexual activity. Most of the respondents (i.e., more than 50%) in this group of 2,125 teachers thought that most of the students in their schools (i.e., more than 50%) would respond affirmatively to each of those three value statements. In other words, most of these teachers saw most of their students as "bad."

Looking at the data from a different perspective, 44% of the 2,125 teachers thought that most students would respond affirmatively to all three statements, and another 41% estimated that students would respond "Yes" to one or two of the three statements. Only 15% of the teachers thought that most students would respond "No" to all three statements. The data are very persuasive. Again, most of these teachers thought that most of their students were "bad," as that term was defined in this project.

One question immediately comes up: Are these teachers' perceptions accurate? That is, would most high school students actually respond to the three items in the questionnaire the way most of the teachers thought they would respond? Lurking behind this question is the old bugaboo: Even if most young people responded that way, would their responses correspond precisely with their overt behaviors? About the latter question, we have no good answer. Frankly, we do not know how to observe high school students carefully enough to determine whether "most" high school students actually drink alcohol, use drugs, and engage in sexual activity (or whether we would want to do that, even if we could).

So we are back to the original question: Would most of the high school students in these 2,125 teachers' schools have responded "Yes" to these three questionnaire items? Again, we do not know. We do know that we have never seen a report in the popular press or in the professional literature which stipulated that most (i.e., more than 50%) high school students engage in these kinds of behaviors. For example, in the story cited in the first paragraph above (i.e., "Why More Kids Are Into Pot"), the statistics reported there indicated that 34.7% of 12th graders "say they have smoked pot in the past year," and 28.7% of 10th graders said the same thing. The report further stated that figures on the use of pot were beginning to rise "after 13 years of decline," suggesting that the use of pot has not been at or above the 50% level for a long time, perhaps never. This particular story related only to the use of marijuana, of course, and if other drugs were factored in, it might be that drug use would be at above the 50 percent level, but we doubt it.

The general media rely heavily on incidental or anecdotal information to make their stories compelling. Statistics are usually cited, but the need to command attention with the human interest element in such stories often means that writers or producers lean heavily on descriptive information about one case to make their point, dramatically and vividly. In the article cited above, for instance, a 17 year old male was involved in a gun accident (he played

Russian roulette when he was high on marijuana). "I only smoked (pot) a few months," he said, "now I'm on drugs for the rest of my life." Stories such as this one convey the impression that "everybody's doing it," so teachers may make inferences which lead them to conclude that most high school students drink alcohol, most students use drugs, and most students engage in sexual activity, even though generally available evidence suggests that those statements are not true.

In *A Study of Core Values and the Schools*, we reported that we also asked high school students to respond to the same questionnaire items that we asked high school teachers to estimate how high school students would respond. These students were not from the same schools as those in which the teachers taught--they were not even in typical schools--but almost 2,500 teenagers did respond to exactly the same value statements on a questionnaire titled "What Do You Really Believe?" [3] The directions to high school students were printed on the form as follows:

> Fill in the oval under "YES" or "NO" after each statement, according to whether you believe the statement to be correct or not. We want to know what you really believe, but do NOT sign your name anywhere. This is a completely anonymous questionnaire. No one will know how you respond.

Forty of the 43 statements related directly to values (e.g., "God controls everything that happens to people," and "Most students who don't cheat are at a real disadvantage in some classes"), but the statements about alcohol, drugs, and sexual activity on which this report is based described behaviors rather than values.

We said earlier that the students who completed the values questionnaire were not "typical" and that the students came from schools that were neither "typical" nor "randomly selected." In fact, about three fourths of the 2,429 students who completed the questionnaire were white, Catholic, middle-class students, and they attended parochial schools. About one fourth of the students were black, non-Catholic, lower-class students, and they attended inner city public schools. All students lived and went to school in large urban areas.

If we invoke stereotypical notions of "good' and "bad" students, we might be inclined to predict that fewer parochial school students would respond "Yes" to the statements about alcohol, drugs, and sex, and more public school students would respond "Yes" to those same three statements. "Young people who grow up in bad environments," we might say, "are more apt to engage in bad behaviors." Stereotypes are often wrong, however, and that would certainly be true in this particular case.

For example, 32% of the parochial students indicated that they drank alcohol, but only 22% of the public school students responded the same way. In all, 15% of the parochial school students responded affirmatively to the statement about using drugs, and 18% of the public school students responded the same way. Finally, 38% of the parochial school students indicated that they had engaged in sexual activity, whereas 59% of the public school students reported that they had engaged in sexual activity (finally, one group in which "most" of the students responded "Yes" to one of the values statements).

Considering the two groups of students as one sample, only 213 students (9%) responded "Yes" to all three statements, while 1,087 students (45%) responded "No" to all three statements. Of course, these young people were not students in the high schools in which the teachers who estimated how students would respond actually taught, so a direct comparison is not possible. Even so, there seems to be little evidence that "most students are bad," as the data cited earlier regarding teachers' estimates suggested.

Assuming that, if we had information from these teachers' own students, those students' responses might not differ much from what we have reported here, we would still be left with a need to explain why most teachers seem to think that most of their students behave immorally in these three value areas: alcohol, drugs, and sex. How can such negative perceptions of young people by trained professionals be explained?

Maybe students lie when they respond to a values questionnaire. Perhaps, but most researchers accept anonymous responses as valid indicators of what people think and what they do. What seems more plausible is that teachers, without a lot of first-hand evidence about students' involvement with alcohol, drugs or sex, but with an excess of second-hand information from the media, simply assume the worst. It has been said that, "if people do not know, they fear the worst." What we have here might be empirical verification of that oft-stated homily.

This is not a pretty picture. In this study, hundreds of teachers thought their students were guilty of immoral acts, and the odds are overwhelming that those thoughts were seriously in error. We could not present convincing evidence in this report that these teachers' perceptions were inaccurate (because the students who completed the values questionnaire were not from the same schools as the teachers who estimated how their students would respond), but this question could be resolved by further research. If the general pattern that emerges in future studies parallels what we have reported here, the profession has some serious thinking to do.

Youth crime is on the rise, but youth do not produce pornographic videotapes or sell them. Adults do. Youth do not bring drugs into the country and distribute them. Adults do. Youth do not make alcohol easily available. Adults do.

There are "bad" kids out there, that is certainly true, but not as many as some people (even some teachers) seem to believe. We have the highest incarceration rate in the world--more than a million persons in prison today, mostly young people--but even that large number represents less than 1% of the nation's population over 16 years of age. Most young people are not bad, regardless of how we define the term.

Maybe the factors associated with this problem are in some way comparable to what shows up every year in the Gallup Poll on the Public's Attitudes About Education: most people think that their own child's school is pretty good, but schools in general are bad. Perhaps a reversal of that phenomenon is in operation here: teachers think that other schools have pretty good (i.e., "moral") students, but the students in their own school are bad (i.e., "immoral"). This problem area warrants careful study.

References

1. Monika Guttman, "The New Pot Culture," *USA Weekend* (February 16-18, 1996), pp. 4-8. The cover page of this magazine states: "39.1 million readers every weekend."

2. Jack Frymier, et al., *A Study of Core Values and the Schools: Final Report* (Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa, 1996), Chapter 6.

3. Ibid.